

‘I have no wish to be PM’: Johnson protests his loyalty



Tories fearing new election will want her to hang on

Analysis

Tory MPs have decided, for now, that a bad prime minister is better than no prime minister (Sam Coates writes). The Conservatives specialise in prime ministers that are “in office but not in power” — a criticism that Norman Lamont made of John Major in 1993, which has now returned to hang round Theresa May’s neck.

Having lost her majority in the Commons and holding back Jeremy Corbyn from the gates of Downing Street only because of the efforts of Ruth Davidson, the Scottish

Conservative leader, Mrs May is on borrowed time. She is at the mercy of a newly invigorated cabinet. Scottish Tories are already threatening to vote differently to their colleagues south of the border.

Yet those hoping for Tory MPs to plunge the dagger in the coming days are likely to be disappointed. The overriding priority for Conservatives at Westminster this week is to avoid anything that triggers another election, fearing that they will do even worse if they go to the polls again.

“What Theresa May and her team have done, incredibly, is to retoxify the image of the Tory

party. The woman behind the ‘nasty party’ speech has made us nasty again. This is going to take a long time to deal with,” said one member of the government who spent the weekend talking to colleagues.

Tory MPs will do everything they can to delay Britain going to the polls again. Therefore, they broadly support a pact with the Democratic Unionists, while urging Mrs May not to go into full coalition.

Conservative MPs will probably be loyal in the immediately future when votes on Brexit are needed. And, most of all, they are likely to turn on anyone who looks like they are manoeuvring to succeed Mrs

May. This is where Boris Johnson is vulnerable. Despite vociferous denials of plotting overnight, the foreign secretary might not be believed by colleagues and could face an uphill task to prove that he is not busy undermining Mrs May.

In the end, it is unsustainable that Britain can continue to rely on a lame duck prime minister with a party that loathes her and a country that failed to endorse her plans. Her survival — which depends on the good grace of her cabinet, MPs, the DUP and events — will be a matter of months, not years. However, Tory MPs will try to keep her in place for as long as they possibly can.

Sam Coates Deputy Political Editor

Boris Johnson furiously denied he was plotting to steal the crown from Theresa May yesterday despite signs that he has decided to go for the Tory leadership again when she departs.

Reports that the foreign secretary was already “on manoeuvres” triggered anger yesterday with one Tory minister saying Mr Johnson would “never become prime minister and never be forgiven” if there were any signs of his agitating for the leadership.

Mr Johnson dismissed as “tripe” reports that he was campaigning for the leadership. “I am backing Theresa May,” he said. “Let’s get on with the job.”

However, there was suspicion among some Tory colleagues after he sent a

string of WhatsApp messages to MPs telling them all to be loyal. It said “Folks we need to calm down and get behind the prime minister.”

He issued an eight-point defence of the prime minister, highlighting the fact that she won a bigger vote share than “anyone since Margaret Thatcher”, and said that Britain must “get on” and deliver Brexit.

He said in the message: “We must not allow the media to spread mischief not least because the public are fed up to the back teeth of politics and politicians, and they certainly DO NOT want another election.”

But this was greeted by suspicion from MPs. “He is keeping her in place until he is better placed to remove her,” said one MP.



Theresa May and her husband Philip attended a church service in her Maidenhead seat yesterday as the foreign secretary, Boris

Johnson, far left, denied claims he was preparing to oust her. The former chancellor George Osborne, above, said she was a “dead woman walking”, and Nick Timothy, below left, with Sir Alan Duncan MP and Fiona Hill, has come in for criticism



Ousted MP

Sam Coates

Theresa May has chosen Gavin Barwell to be her chief of staff after fearing there would be too great a backlash among MPs against Ben Gummer, an early contender for the post.

The defeated former Tory MP for Ipswich, the only cabinet casualty of the election, was one of the names discussed to take over from Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill after they resigned on Saturday.

Some Tory MPs, however, said that Mr Gummer, an enthusiastic supporter of Remain who helped to draw up the much-criticised Conservative manifesto, would not help defuse tensions inside the party.

Mr Barwell, who was housing minister until he lost his seat in

The foreign secretary remains close to the three MPs who ran his first leadership campaign: Jake Berry, Ben Wallace and Nigel Adams, so would have a team ready to go in the event of a vacancy. One Tory grandee said that Mr Johnson and his allies had had their “knuckles very severely rapped” for making his intentions too obvious.

Reports suggested that five cabinet ministers were backing him to take over from Mrs May when she goes. Many MPs believe Mrs May has months rather than years left in the job, which will leave a power vacuum at the top of British politics.

The former chancellor, George Osborne, said yesterday that Mrs May’s days in Downing Street were clearly numbered. “Theresa May is a dead

woman walking. It is just how long she is going to remain on death row,” Mr Osborne, who is now editor of the London *Evening Standard*, told BBC One’s *The Andrew Marr Show*.

“I think we will know very shortly. We could easily get to the middle of next week and it all collapses for her.”

However, there is fear that another contest could force a general election which could lead to more Tory MPs losing their seats and Jeremy Corbyn becoming prime minister. This means that many MPs do not want to start a leadership contest, fearing the one could lead to the other.

The next leadership contest could also be an existential battle over Europe if one of the contenders tries to advocate staying inside the single market. One

enthusiastic supporter of the former prime minister David Cameron said: “The right of the party have taken us to the edge of a Jeremy Corbyn government. This cannot be forgotten and we must never let them do this again.”

Graham Brady, who chairs the 1922 Committee of backbench Conservative MPs, made clear that most were strongly against a contest which could lead to an election.

Speaking to Mark Mardell on BBC Radio 4’s *The World this Weekend*, he said: “There are only two choices: one is for us to get on — what I think is the responsible way — and try and form a government and try to offer the right kind of responsible leadership that the country needs.

“The other would be to go back to the

country for another general election. I don’t detect any desire among the British public to go through the whole process of a general election again.”

This was reinforced by a string of Conservative MPs and peers who believe Mrs May is on borrowed time but does not need to depart at once.

Lord Heseltine, the former deputy prime minister who was sacked by Mrs May, said: “She’ll never lead the Conservative Party into another election but there is no immediate need for a change.

“Indeed my own hope would be that perhaps her last service to the party would be to give it the time to think about a successor — but very much in the context of the policies of the successor. You see, you’ve got to face the real-

ity that the present situation is unsustainable. The DUP may be a short-term palliative but it is not enough of a support to last through a parliament and what the Conservative Party has to ask itself, very simply, is how are we going to stop Jeremy Corbyn entering No10 Downing Street?”

Anna Soubry, the Tory MP and avowed Remain supporter, said: “I think [Mrs May’s] position in the long term is untenable and it is with regret.

“I was one of the first people to come out and support Theresa but the election result where she put her name on the campaign — I just can’t see how she can continue with any long-term way.

“I think she will have to go unfortunately but not for some time, let’s get this clear.”

May wanted to drop hated ‘strong and stable’ slogan

Henry Zeffman Political Reporter
Sam Coates

Theresa May hated the slogan “strong and stable” and complained about using it repetitively during interviews.

The slogan was believed to have been thought up by Sir Lynton Crosby. By the third week of the campaign, it had all but disappeared and was never revived after the debacle over the social care plan in the manifesto.

The prime minister is facing a grassroots backlash over the disastrous general campaign. A snap survey of 1,503 Conservative members by the website Conservative Home found that 60 per cent wanted her to resign as party leader. Only 37 per cent thought that she should remain.

Paul Goodman, editor of *Conservative Home*, said that the results revealed an astonishing level of disaffection. “Obviously, party members and our readers are angry in the election’s aftermath, and it may be that if the question is asked again in a week’s time, it gets a different answer,” he said.

“Nonetheless, that two in three of her own members, according to this survey, believe that a Conservative leader should resign is astonishing. It is the most damning finding in one of our polls that I can remember.”

Activists hit out at the party’s failings in the “ground war”. Where campaigners canvassed around the country was determined by lists of voters sent out by Conservative campaign headquarters (CCHQ) — trouncing local canvassing data built up over several years.

Those lists relied on the work of Jim Messina, the former Obama campaign guru who worked on David Cameron’s 2015 election campaign. Mr Messina pioneered the technique of voter “segmentation”, under which demographic data and publicly available information are combined to rate each voter on their likelihood of voting Tory.

Activists in target seats with large memberships were furious that their own local knowledge was overruled. In one Labour-held marginal constituency, the canvassing lists sent by CCHQ included a prominent local Liberal Democrat but did not include scores of people who, activists knew, were open to voting Conservative.

“It felt like we were specifically forbidden from talking to our vote,” one activist said.

When one local party mooted the prospect of relying on its own canvass data, it was made clear that doing so would mean an end to all ministerial visits to the constituency. Another local

party in a seat that the Tories had no chance of winning was threatened with suspension after delivering a leaflet to voters without CCHQ’s permission.

Simon Cooke, leader of the Conservative group on Bradford council, accused CCHQ of only valuing members for “cash and leaflet delivery”. “My party needs to rebuild its base,” he said. “[It’s] not enough to rely on centralised campaigning.”

The use of “strong and stable” was one of a number of points of tension between Mrs May’s circle and those from Crosby Textor, brought in at short notice to help with the campaign.

The prime minister’s supporters blamed the Australian election guru for her defeat. In his resignation statement, Nick Timothy, Mrs May’s former joint chief of staff, said that the campaign “failed to get ... Theresa’s positive plan for the future across. It also failed to notice the surge in Labour support, because modern campaigning techniques require ever-narrower targeting of specific voters and we were not talking to the people who decided to vote for Labour.”

Sir Lynton’s camp blamed the disastrous pledge on social care, which was partly written by Mr Timothy. Sir Lynton, who advised the prime minister against holding an early election, reportedly said in response to the manifesto: “A Conservative Party ought to have some conservative policies.”

Midway through the campaign one aide told Mrs May that she risked becoming like Sarah Palin, the 2008 running-mate for the Republican US presidential candidate John McCain.

Ms Palin, like May, had a burst of popularity before her approval ratings sank sharply. Mrs May listened to the analysis, according to the Politico website, but did not change her approach.

Sir Lynton is also said to be concerned with the reputational damage of his role in the campaign. “Lynton is fuming with them,” a campaign source told *The Sunday Times*. “He is concerned his reputation will be trashed when he did not have control.”

The newspaper also revealed that Mrs May cried before visiting Buckingham Palace on Friday afternoon. “She was crying before she went to the palace,” a source said. The prime minister was also reportedly on the verge of tears when she addressed campaign staff at CCHQ at 4.30am on Friday.

As the exit poll was proved correct by early seat declarations, one May aide reportedly keeled over and was physically sick.

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bounces back to No 10 as chief of staff

Croydon Central on Thursday, was chosen to oversee the governing agreement with the DUP, a cabinet reshuffle and restaffing an empty No10.

A low key but popular figure in the Tory party, he published a book last



Gavin Barwell was not first choice as the PM’s top aide

official before entering parliament. He grew up in Croydon and went to a local private school on a scholarship.

After graduating from Trinity College, Cambridge, he joined the research department of Conservative Central Office, taking roles such as operations director before going on to work as a special adviser to John Gummer, the father of Ben.

In 2002, an anonymous Tory official said online that Mr Barwell had the nickname “hamster face, for indeed his visage is hamsterish”.

In the election campaign of 2010, he worked with Lord Ashcroft, the Tory donor, on the party’s campaign in marginal seats but he also enjoyed strong relationships with David Cameron and George Osborne. He has a reputation for being a pragmatist.

Mr Barwell, 45, was a veteran party

year called *How to Win a Marginal Seat: My Year Fighting for My Political Life*. Last week, he lost his seat by more than 5,000 votes.